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Repairing the Interagency Process



Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III hosts Coalition Provisional Authority overview for members of the U.S. House of Representatives in Baghdad

Fleet/Combat Camera Atlantic (Michael Sandberg)

By NORA BENSACHEL and ANNE M. MOISAN

One of the most common complaints from national security practitioners and analysts is that the interagency process is broken. Getting various U.S. Government agencies to pursue common and coherent policies is a perennial problem. Two decades ago, similar criticisms were made about the lack of military jointness—poor coordination and communication between the Services during operations. Fixing this problem took a groundbreaking piece of legislation, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which changed defense structures that had remained unaltered since the National Security Act of 1947.

Today, after 20 years of work, jointness is an integral part of U.S. military operations, even though each step of the reform process met with bureaucratic resentment and occasional efforts at sabotage. Redirecting the interagency process to produce consistent, coherent national policy that all Government agencies follow for stability and reconstruction operations will be no less difficult. This challenge requires a new round of institutional reforms and, more importantly, new interagency leaders with the skills and knowledge to break down bureaucratic stovepipes.

As the interagency process has become increasingly involved in postconflict stabilization and reconstruction in the past decade, its shortcomings have become more apparent. Though some reforms have been adopted in the past 2 years, they have already proven insufficient. Transforming the process may seem like a dry exercise in drawing wiring diagrams, but the stakes are far higher than those of a normal bureaucratic squabble. When agencies pursue uncoordinated strategies during major combat, stability, or reconstruction operations, the consequences can be severe—including wasted resources, unachieved objectives, reduced public support, and unnecessary loss of lives.

Examples of poor interagency cooperation abound in recent U.S. operations. In Afghanistan, for instance, the process of building an international coalition was hampered by the different approaches of the Departments of State and Defense. Diplomats sought broadly based international support to include as

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many partners as possible in Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Military planners, on the other hand, focused on military effectiveness and wanted only militarily significant, rather than symbolic, coalition contributions. Both objectives were reasonable, but the failure to coordinate them into a single national policy meant that potential members received mixed signals, depending on which U.S. official they were talking to. This lack of unity led to diplomatic frustration and resentment and to allied reluctance to participate in stabilization efforts after the fall of the Taliban.

The consequences of poor interagency coordination are even more obvious and consequential in Iraq. An interagency planning process did exist before Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, but the lead agency for postwar reconstruction was named only 8 weeks before major combat operations commenced. That was hardly enough time to coordinate plans and stands in stark contrast to the 15 months devoted to planning combat operations in Iraq or the several years of occupation planning that preceded the conquest of Japan and Germany during World War II.¹

The failure to coordinate civilian and military efforts had tremendous consequences during the occupation of Iraq. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, the civilian administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, USA, the senior military officer in theater, met often but never established procedures for anything more than ad hoc policy coordination.² The delays that occurred meant that the CPA lacked a significant presence outside Baghdad for many months, and military commanders were forced to fill that void by developing uncoordinated policies on governance and other civilian matters within their areas of operations.

This dynamic made the CPA's task even more challenging, since it had to reconcile varying, and in some cases contradictory,

policies into a single coherent policy. The failure to establish coordinated national policy, including planning for the massively complex task of postconflict stabilization and reconstruction both before Operation *Iraqi Freedom* and during the subsequent occupation, contributed immeasurably to the widespread chaos, delays, and civil frustration that enabled the insurgency to take root. That

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insurgency has already cost over \$350 billion and claimed the lives of more than 2,800 U.S. military personnel and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians.³

Recent Reform Efforts

The Iraq experience has sparked a flurry of reforms designed to improve the U.S. capacity to conduct stability operations. The two most notable changes are interrelated: the establishment of a new office within the Department of State and the subsequent Presidential directive designating the office as the lead agency for stabilization and reconstruction. Less than 2 years after their adoption, however, it is becoming clear that both measures have notable weaknesses and are insufficient.

In July 2004, the Department of State created a new Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS). Its mission is to “lead, coordinate, and institutionalize U.S. Government civilian capacity to prevent or prepare for post-conflict situations, and to help stabilize and reconstruct societies in transition from conflict or civil strife so they can reach a sustainable path toward peace, democracy, and a market economy.”⁴ Ambassador Carlos Pascual, named the first coordinator, focused the office on planning and preparing for future contingencies rather than becoming involved in ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵ The office’s more notable activities in its first 2 years have been limited to publishing an Essential Task Matrix, publishing lessons learned reports, creating a draft planning framework, and developing a database of deployable civilians.

In December 2005, the George W. Bush administration issued National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD) 44. It designates the State Department as the lead agency for all U.S. stabilization and reconstruction activities and gives S/CRS numerous responsibilities in assisting the Secretary of State in fulfilling that mission. It also establishes a Policy Coordination Committee for Reconstruction and Stabilization Operations, a formal interagency coordination mechanism to be co-chaired by the head of S/CRS and a member of the National Security Council (NSC) staff.

NSPD 44 contains notable ambiguities and omissions, such as not identifying clear lines of authority between military and civilian leaders during actual operations. Yet the most important problem is that S/CRS simply does not have the capacity

to execute its responsibilities. Moreover, the office has neither the resources nor the political support to fulfill its mission. Its permanent staff remains smaller than envisaged and includes no interagency representation. Furthermore, its budget has repeatedly been scaled back by Congress, and it lacks the bureaucratic clout to coordinate policy within the State Department, much less within the broader interagency process.

The Department of Defense does support centralizing stabilization and reconstruction missions in State and has provided funds and temporary personnel, but these additional resources have not significantly increased S/CRS functional capacity. Indeed, some have speculated that Ambassador Pascual announced his resignation after serving only 14 months because of frustration over the lack of support.

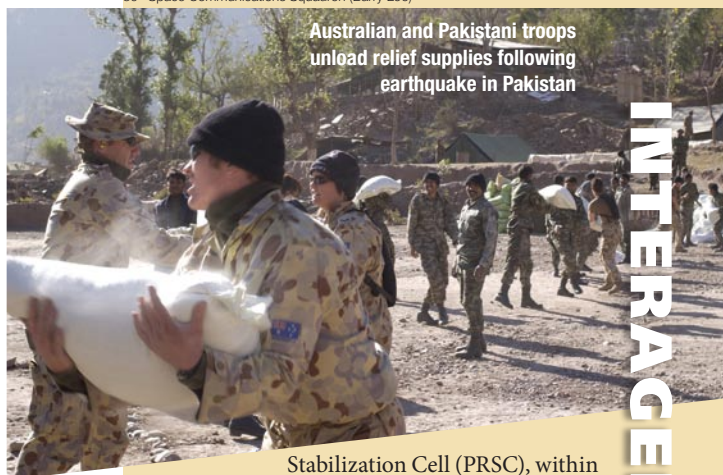
In short, despite original hopes for S/CRS, it is too weak to become an effective interagency lead for stabilization and reconstruction operations, and the causes of its weakness seem unlikely to be rectified soon. It is faced with limited interagency authority, resources, and capabilities. That said, the office still has an important role within the State Department, helping to coordinate the often-conflicting policies of the different regional and functional bureaus, but its window of opportunity to establish itself as a strong and effective interagency coordinator has already closed. A new approach is needed to ensure effective interagency coordination for prevention, reconstruction, and stabilization missions.

Putting the NSC Back in Charge

The National Security Council is the only U.S. Government structure capable of executing this complex interagency task. Any other existing agency is bound to be insufficient because of the inevitable bureaucratic frictions, clashes among organizational missions and cultures, and absence of enforceable directive authority. In contrast, the NSC is designed to sit above the individual agencies and is already tasked with integrating differing perspectives into coherent national policy. That suits it ideally for the mission at hand.

We propose creating a new structure, called the Prevention, Reconstruction, and

30th Space Communications Squadron (Barry Loo)



Australian and Pakistani troops unload relief supplies following earthquake in Pakistan

Stabilization Cell (PRSC), within the NSC. The PRSC would integrate and synchronize cross-departmental capabilities and provide a comprehensive approach to national strategy, thus largely negating the departmental stovepipes and the parochial, piecemeal approach to crisis management and prevention. Its director would report to the National Security Advisor.

The heart of the PRSC would consist of current S/CRS personnel authorizations and resources transferred directly from the Departments of State and Defense. It would be a flat, streamlined organization with 10 to 15 core members, who would be permanent employees of the NSC rather than detailees from other agencies. The cell would have directive authority over supporting interagency departments in policy development and strategic planning and execution of crisis management, conflict, and postconflict operations. While individual departments or agencies would be designated as operational and tactical leads for execution purposes, policy oversight and strategic directive authority would remain firmly embedded with PRSC.

The standing cell would have responsibility for oversight and planning of the functions as laid out in the accompanying figure. The director would be limited to a small, agile staff. Along with a deputy and executive officer, there would be three divisions, focused respectively on strategic planning, crisis management and prevention, and coalition building. Although each division would have its own staff of three or four personnel, the interrelated nature of their tasks would require close coordination, integration, and information-sharing. In addition, each division would have planning, networking, and coordination responsibility with relevant governmental departments and agencies. Division cells would receive additional temporary

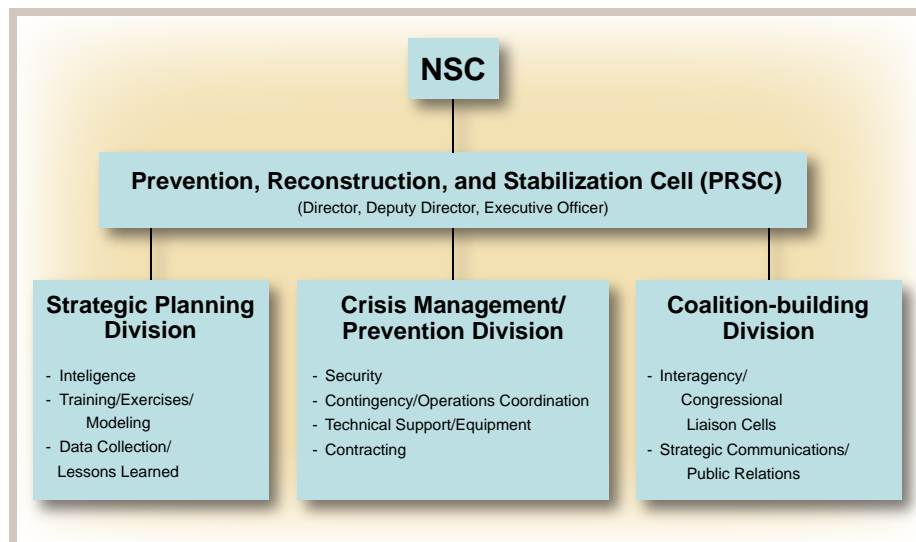
manning only as the director and the National Security Advisor deemed necessary based on operational surge requirements.

The strategic planning division would pull together intelligence on potential conflicts around the world, recommend and coordinate options for planning, and ensure that changes to plans, doctrine, and operations are quickly made to capture lessons learned through contingency planning efforts. The crisis management and prevention division would be responsible for predicting and averting conflicts and responding to those that emerge. It would also bring together elements of support to coordinate and expedite measured responses. Finally, the coalition-building division would focus on fashioning capabilities and relationships with possible future partners. In addition, it would coordinate with interagency partners and Congress, as well as provide U.S. public information and education programs on its activities.

Developing True Interagency Leaders

The PRSC is a necessary first step toward effective interagency coordination for prevention, reconstruction, and stabilization missions, but it is not sufficient on its own. True interagency leaders are needed who can focus on integrating the many elements of national power into coherent policy rather than representing the interests of their home agencies. Leadership starts at the top. Since the PRSC director exists to execute the vision of the President, he or she must be able and willing to challenge the parochial interests of individual agencies instead of settling for diluted compromises and consensus. Although previous departmental experience would certainly be helpful, the director must be chosen based on vision and leadership skills rather than simply on seniority. The director would also require an annual budget sufficient to meet mission requirements. As PRSC's responsibility and credibility grow, some funding previously earmarked for defense and foreign affairs activities, as well as other department budgets, would need to be transferred to the cell to cover increasing operational costs and reflect the shift of interagency responsibility.

The PRSC staff, like the director, must be dedicated first and foremost to the interagency mission. The cell would not be an organization of detailees, serving at the whim of, and still loyal to, their home departments. Just as Special Operations Forces possess



unique characteristics within single branches of the military, PRSC personnel need capabilities not found within individual Government agencies, including:

- crisis management experience
- networking and strong people skills
- negotiating skills
- planning experience at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels
- self-defense and small arms experience
- critical language skills
- rapid deployment ability
- security and intelligence skills.

PRSC personnel should expect to serve a minimum of 5 years before rotating to new assignments, so they can develop a depth of expertise in their functional areas and in the bureaucratic processes of multiple agencies. Furthermore, they should expect to be deployed to nonpermissive environments, sometimes on short notice, where they could be embedded with combat or security forces that are in harm's way. Because PRSC personnel would possess unusual qualifications and would operate in a high-tempo, often high-stress environment, significant bonuses and specialized pay would be required to ensure retention. Ongoing training would be required to see that personnel are exposed to a wide variety of crisis situations. Some training would involve exercises and simulations, which would help the team develop specific contingency plans.

The current interagency process has proven ineffective in addressing the complex prevention, reconstruction, and stabilization

challenges of the 21st century. Recent reforms have been unsuccessful in breaking the departmental stovepipes and bureaucratic inertia that ultimately undermine national security. The proposed Prevention, Reconstruction, and Stabilization Cell would sit above existing departments and agencies and draw its authority directly from the National Security Council and ultimately the President. It is designed to be agile, flat, and flexible. Perhaps most importantly, its multidisciplinary staff would provide the broad range of talents and skills required to address crisis management from prevention to postconflict stabilization and reconstruction. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ For more on the prewar planning process in Iraq, see Nora Bensahel, "Mission Not Accomplished: What Went Wrong with Iraqi Reconstruction," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 3 (June 2006), 453–473.

² Interviews with Coalition Provisional Authority and Combined Joint Task Force–7 officials. See also Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

³ Estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths since March 19, 2003, range from 20,600 to 98,200, due to the unreliability of the data and whether deaths resulting from crime should be included. See The Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, August 17, 2006, 4 and 10, available at <www.brookings.edu/iraqindex>.

⁴ Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization mission statement, available at <www.crs.state.gov>.

⁵ See *Joint Force Quarterly* 42 (3rd quarter 2006) for an interview with Ambassador Carlos Pascual. [Ed.]